

13 February 1986

EX-SALVADORAN OFFICER TELLS OF 'DEATH SQUAD' ACTIONS
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WASHINGTON

FILE ONE

An ex-Salvadoran army officer says he personally commanded a "death squad" team in the early 1980s and witnessed El Salvador's U.S.-backed military execute civilians during a counterinsurgency sweep.

Former Lt. Ricardo Ernesto Castro said Salvadoran soldiers and police routinely participated in death squad killings of suspected "subversives." He said he led four assassination missions, claiming about a dozen lives.

Castro, a 1973 West Point graduate, said he also saw the army slaughter unarmed women and children during a counterinsurgency sweep near the Rio Lempa in the fall of 1981. The bodies were dumped into shallow streams as a warning to leftist guerrillas.

"My company was thirsty, but the soldiers would not take water from one of these streams because of these kids' corpses," Castro said in a recent tape-recorded interview at his suburban Washington home.

Castro, who left El Salvador in mid-1982, is the first Salvadoran army officer to publicly state that he participated in death squad killings. He initially told his story to free-lance reporter Allan Nairn for an article in the current issue of Progressive magazine.

Castro, 35, said he was recruited to work with the CIA and served as a translator for an American who trained the Salvadoran military on interrogation techniques. He said the American trainer did not advocate torture, but suggested that suspects be kept "completely disoriented" by isolating them and employing psychological tactics.

During the early 1980s, the Reagan administration disputed many human rights charges lodged against the Salvadoran government. But in 1984, the Senate Intelligence Committee said the U.S. government had concluded that "numerous Salvadoran officials in the military and security forces ... have been involved in encouraging and conducting death squad activities or other violent human rights abuses."

The administration now contends abuses have been brought under control, although private human rights groups say government forces still commit selective murders in the cities and use indiscriminate firepower in the countryside.

An estimated 50,000 civilians have died in the 6-year-old civil war.

Castro said he came to the United States in mid-1982 to tell U.S. officials about the corruption and atrocities that many young officers felt were undermining prospects for restoring peace in El Salvador. After his appeals received little attention, he said he decided to stay here with his wife and three children. Castro, who is a Salvadoran citizen, said he plans to request political asylum in the United States.

Working odd jobs to support his family, Castro said he did not tell his story earlier to avoid trouble with U.S. authorities, but finally decided the information should be made public.

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Castro said political assassinations represented a policy established by the military high command. Death squads initially used army personnel, he said, but later government security forces, particularly the Treasury Police, took over.

"All the killings I know of were done by the armed forces," Castro said.

The former lieutenant said he would receive orders from his commanding officer to take a team of soldiers in civilian clothes and follow a guide, known as a "chanique," to the homes of suspected leftists.

Castro said the informer would identify the target and "we'd kill him right on the spot."

Castro also said he witnessed the slaughter of unarmed civilians during the U.S.-trained Atlacatl battalion's march to the Rio Lempa on the Honduran border in November 1981.

"Twenty-two or 24 were killed ... in front of my troops. I didn't like it one bit, little girls yelling, 'Mama, mama,' someone being killed in cold blood," he said.

"Some corpses were carried as much as two miles to different tributaries and each one deposited in a shallow place so the river wouldn't take it. It was telling the guerrillas, 'Look what could happen to you,'" Castro said.

In December 1981, he said, he was told he might be needed to help interrogate about 600 civilians in two towns in Morazan province where the guerrillas had been active. Even though the army knew the guerrillas had fled, Castro said, a major told him that all the people would be shot.

Castro said he did not participate in the operation, but was informed later that the mass killings had occurred. The events, described by Castro, match allegations from human rights groups that the army slaughtered hundreds of civilians in Morazan province around Christmas 1981 — charges the Reagan administration disputed.